

THEIR CHILD

ROBERT
HERRICK



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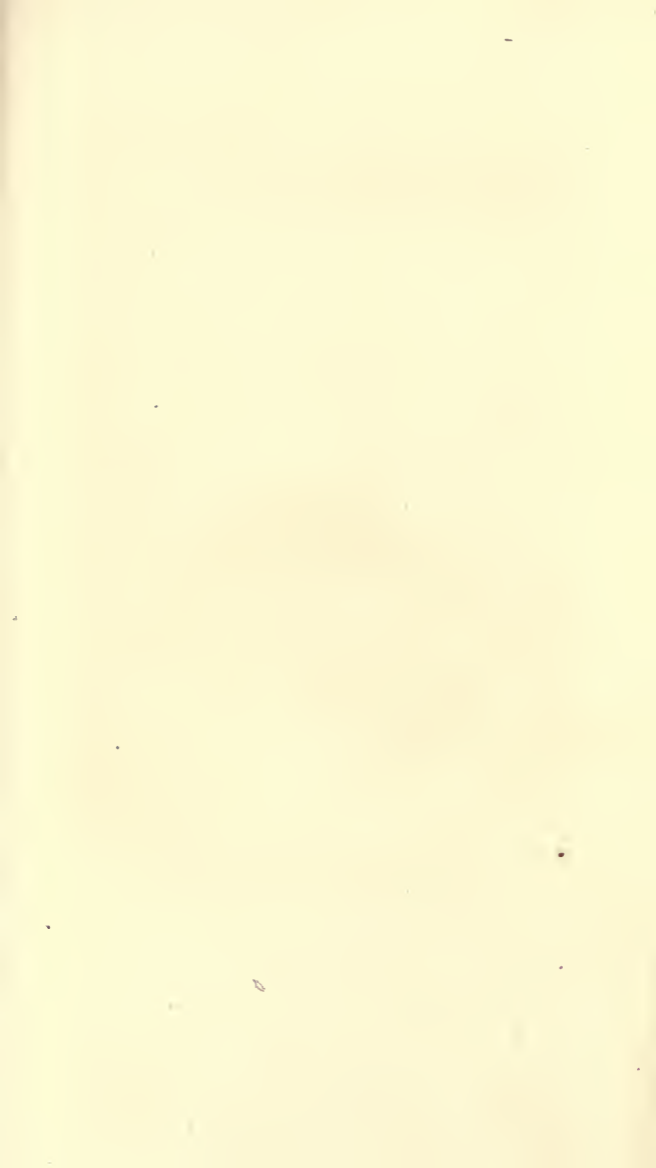


Their Child



ROBERT HERRICK

•The M Co. •





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BY

ROBERT HERRICK

AUTHOR OF "THE WEB OF LIFE," "THE MAN
WHO WINS," "THE GOSPEL OF FREEDOM,"
ETC.



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MR. ROBERT HERRICK, the author of "The Gospel of Freedom," "The Web of Life," and "The Real World," was born in Cambridge, Mass., April 26, 1868. His father was a lawyer, practising in Boston. His people on both sides were of New England stock, the Herricks running back in New England to 1632, and the Emerys, Mannings, Hales, and Peabodys, with whom among others his genealogy is connected, having much the same history. Mr. Herrick was educated at the Cambridge public schools, and at Harvard University, graduating in 1890. His freshman year and part of his sophomore year were spent in travelling in the West Indies, Mexico, California, Alaska, and other regions, in company with his classmate, Philip Stanley Abbot. While in college Mr. Herrick paid special attention to English studies, attending courses of lectures delivered by the late Professor Child, Professor James, and Professor Barrett Wendell, among others.

For a year he was one of the editors of the *Harvard Advocate*, and contributed several stories to that magazine. Later he was editor of the *Harvard Monthly*—the purely literary magazine of the University,—contributing frequently to its pages. One of his fellow-editors was Norman Hapgood, the author of “Abraham Lincoln: the Man of the People,” and “George Washington.”

After graduation Mr. Herrick began to teach English at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, under Professor George R. Carpenter (now of Columbia University), and continued to correct themes and to give an occasional course in literature until 1893, when he resigned his position in Boston to accept an instructorship in English at the University of Chicago. In 1895 he was appointed Assistant Professor of Rhetoric in the University, and he has since taught chiefly Rhetoric and English Composition.

The summer of 1892 he spent in England

and on the Continent. In 1895 he went abroad for fifteen months, for rest and literary work, living in Paris and Florence during most of the period. While in Europe he wrote the first draft of "The Man Who Wins," which was published two years later; also the first form of "The Gospel of Freedom," and various short stories, which were first published in the magazines and afterward reprinted in "Literary Love Letters and Other Stories," and in "Love's Dilemmas." In addition to his writing in the line of fiction, Mr. Herrick has done a great deal of work on more or less professional topics. Magazine articles about methods of teaching rhetoric, introductions and notes for school editions of classics, one or two text-books on rhetoric,—these items give an idea of the sort of work which has occupied Mr. Herrick's attention apart from fiction. He is one of the few modern American writers who have the courage and the strength to paint life

exactly as they see it, — in its joy, its beauty, its sombreness, and its sorrow alike, — without making it seem happier or nearer the ideal than it is.

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I

“**T**HERE he comes with Dora! I am so glad. I wanted you to see him so much — all of you.”

The company gathered in the drawing-room smiled sympathetically at the mother's pride. They craned their necks about the window to get sight of the small boy. He was a white speck in the long green lawn.

“Comes rather reluctantly,” observed Dr. Vessinger, with a touch of irony. “Doesn't seem to have his mother's taste for society!”

“The little dear! How cunning!”

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A perfect dear!" the women exclaimed with more or less animation.

"Why, he is in such a temper! Little Oscar! What is the matter with little Oscar?"

The child's screams could be heard plainly, coming upward from the lawn, in shrill bursts of infantile passion. Mrs. Simmons was troubled with a mother's confusion and distress. The nurse was holding little Oscar at arm's length, for safety, while the child circled about her, kicking and thrusting with legs and arms. Mrs. Simmons stepped through the open window to the terrace and called:

"Oscar! Oscar!" But neither nurse nor child paid any attention to her.

"He is occupied with a greater passion," the doctor laughed.

"Unconscious little animals, children," observed one of the women.

"He has temperament —"

"His mother's?" another woman suggested slyly. She was large, very blonde, very well preserved, and was

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known by her intimates as "the Magnificent Wreck."

The shrill cries penetrated at last even the room beyond the large drawing-room where the people were gathered, and aroused the father, who had been called on a matter of business into the study. He stepped briskly into the room, — a handsome man of forty, with black curling hair and crisp black beard cut to a point. His cheek-bones were high, and the skin of his upper face was ruddy, as from much living in the open air.

"What is the matter with the boy?" he demanded abruptly.

"Just a case of 'I don't want to,'" observed Dr. Vessinger. "When we are young and feel that way, we let the world know it all of a sudden."

"And when we are grown," joined in the large, blonde woman, smiling at the doctor, "we say nothing, but do as we like."

"If we can," added a young woman,

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with nervous anxiety to be in the conversation.

Mrs. Simmons had disappeared through the French window that opened to the terrace. Her husband followed, and the others lounged, after bandying words on the occasion. They could see below them on the slope of the lawn the young mother, the nurse, the child.

“Why, Dora! What is the matter?” they could hear her say. “Oscar, be still. Be quiet and come to me.”

She must have spoken reprovingly to the nurse, for next came in injured Irish tones:

“What have *I* done, mum? The boy was pounding the breath of life out of the Vance child. I could not keep his fists from his face. What have I done? Indeed!”

“There, don’t answer any more. Take Oscar to the nursery, and wash his face, and bring him down. I want these ladies and gentlemen to see him.”

Little Oscar, who had much the same

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coloring and shape of head as his father, listened quietly while his mother spoke to the nurse. When she had finished and Dora tugged at his hand, he shouted :

“I won’t! Do you hear? I won’t! Don’t you touch me! I say, don’t you touch me!”

He enunciated with great distinctness, with mature deliberation. When the nurse tried to take his arm, she received a well-aimed blow in the pit of her stomach, delivered with all the vigor of a lusty five years.

“Oscar! Why, my little man!” the mother exclaimed helplessly.

Mr. Simmons, who had been watching the group, vaulted over the terrace wall and strode rapidly down the slope. Little Oscar, at the apparition of his long-legged father, turned and fled around the wing of the house. His nurse followed grumblingly.

“Bravo!” exclaimed Dr. Vessinger, satirically. “Young Hercules needs the chastening hand of his sire.”

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“We shall have to call *you* in, I guess, Vessinger, if the kid’s temper gets worse. It’s too much for his mother now, and he is only afraid of me because I am home so little he doesn’t exactly realize I am his father. When he does, he will be boxing *me*.”

“Yes,” sighed Mrs. Simmons, red with annoyance. “It has come all of a sudden, too. He was so gentle as a baby, so sweet. I think it must be the nurse, Dora.”

The company looked sympathetic, and she continued apologetically: “She is a good woman, but she is so tactless. She doesn’t know how to manage the little fellow. She should appeal to his reason, I think.”

“It is sometimes difficult to get a quiet hearing,” observed the doctor.

“Tiresome creatures, nurses,” the Magnificent Wreck added sympathetically. “I can remember how I hated *mine*.”

“Can you?” the younger woman put

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in inadvertently, as though called upon to applaud a triumph of memory.

“But what a beautiful child!” exclaimed the Magnificent one, declining issue with the other. “So like his father, as he stood there, his head thrown back. When he whirled past us just now, there was the gleam of the Viking in his eyes!”

“Yes, all he needed was a carving-knife to be a first-class pirate,” Vessinger added lightly.

The father laughed, but not heartily; and Vessinger, feeling the topic exhausted, turned to his blonde neighbor:

“Mrs. Bellflower, there are real clouds in the sky out there. What do you think of our chances with the rain?”

“You mustn’t go!” their host and hostess protested. Mrs. Simmons added in an undertone: “I wonder if it *could* be the thunder-storm that upset poor little Oscar so completely? Thunder affects me, always.”

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Dr. Vessinger was at her elbow to say good-by.

“It is charming to find you again,” he said, taking her hand and looking boldly into her face. “To find you in this — this splendid scene, with your charming child and your husband. You are looking so young that, if it were not for us others, I might shut my eyes and believe I was in Sicily!”

He spoke ~~deliberately, as though he wished to give two meanings to every word he uttered.~~ The young woman's color changed, and her hands played with the leaves of a book she had taken at random from the table.

“You must come again, often — I want to see you,” she said abruptly, looking at him honestly. “I know you have done some things since that time, and I am glad of it!”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, come! This is nonsense. You aren't going to slip away on any such easy excuse as that,” burst in Simmons.

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“See, your storm is passing around. And if it comes, what could be finer than a gallop back in the clear air after the rain has washed the dirt out? It will lay the dust, too.”

“No, no!” delivered Mrs. Bellflower. “We don’t want to go yet, doctor. Maybe we can stay to dinner if it rains. Let’s go out to the terrace.”

They stepped out of the open windows to the broad brick terrace that completed the east side of the house. Beneath them in the distance, to the eastward, lay the great city, and beyond they knew there was the sea. Over the lofty chimneys and massy ramparts of houses lowered the storm, which was spreading in two forks about the horizon. Slowly it was climbing up the dome of the sky toward them. An edging of gold fired the black mass from time to time.

“Grand place you have here, Simmons,” Dr. Vessinger observed. “The top of a hill not too high,—that’s the right place for a country house.”

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"If Olaf were only here oftener," the wife remarked. "He's just come home, and he says he must leave soon again."

"Yes, those Jews I work for, the Techheimer Brothers, mean that I shall earn my salary. They are dickering for some new mines in Mexico, and want me to look them over."

"But you are promised to me for the tenth," Mrs. Bellflower protested.

"What are the Techheimers to that?" commented the doctor.

"Nothing! I shall put them off until the eleventh," Simmons responded heartily. "It's going to be a fierce jaunt, and I am not keen to start."

"Take us! We would all go, wouldn't we, Mrs. Simmons?" the younger woman put in.

"I am afraid the hotels wouldn't please you down there. And queer things happen sometimes. The last time I was there—it was ticklish. I

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never wanted to go back. You wouldn't have liked it, not you women."

"Tell it! Tell us!" they chorused. Vessinger lit a cigarette and resigned himself to watching the assembling clouds. Imperceptibly he drew away from the group, as if declining to be one where he was not first.

"I *adore* adventures!" the Magnificent Wreck added sentimentally, encouragingly. Simmons folded his arms across his breast. His eyes flashed pleasantly. The story interested him, too:—

"Well, it was in '91, for the Techheimer Brothers. One of the first jobs I did for them. They wired me from St. Louis that a certain old Don from whom I had bought several car-loads of ore, which had been forwarded to their smelter, had done us very prettily. He had salted his cars very cleverly. The ore ran short of the assay by several thousand dollars, all told. I had made the assay—you understand?"

"It was my duty to take the three

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days' journey from the City of Mexico to Don Herara's headquarters in the little town of Los Puertos, see the old rascal, and without having a quarrel, induce him to refund the money he had cheated us out of.

“Los Puertos is almost the loneliest spot I ever got into, for a town. It is at the end of a two days' stage-ride from the railroad. It is hell! Just peons, a great adobe barracks where my old thief lived, a swift river rushing down from the mountains behind the town—nothing more.

“You should have seen us the afternoon of my arrival, sitting in the old Don's office, drinking *petits verres* and swapping compliments. ‘Your honorable excellency,’ said I; ‘Your noble courtesy,’ said he. And so on. The Don had white hair, a hawk nose, brown eyes, that had slunk deep under his brows, and the long white beard of a patriarch. He was a most respectable sinner!

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“Every time some one stepped across the room above I wanted to jump. I thought he must have a dozen or so of his peons hidden up there to slice me with their great *machetes* when he gave the signal. As the afternoon grew mellow, I began to suggest in ten-foot sentences that some rascally servant of his honorable right-mindedness had been deceiving his grace, and had caused my poor masters the loss of some thousands of dollars, the loss of which was nothing to them compared with the sorrow they felt that his honorable good name was thus sullied by an unworthy servant.

“My old Don gulped my compliments without a wink: he had known what I was after all along, of course. When I had turned the corner of the last Spanish sentence, he nodded at me pleasantly, but his brows were stretched like catgut. He cleared his throat and spat, and I seemed to hear all sorts of things going on over my head. That little room was the loneliest place on the earth just then.”

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“Had you a pistol?” broke in Mrs. Bellflower, breathlessly.

“I carefully left that behind me in the City of Mexico. For if it should come to that, it would only have complicated matters. I rarely travel with a revolver.”

Mrs. Bellflower regretted this lack of picturesqueness.

“Well, my Don looked at me for a few minutes. Then he said, ‘Shall we enjoy the cool of the evening in a gentle stroll?’ We went out on the stony trail up toward the black mountains. They looked cold and bare.

“‘Los Puertos,’ he remarked philosophically, ‘is a very small place. It is very far away from your home, Señor Simmons.’ ‘I have been in places farther away, sir, and got back, too.’ ‘I own it all, Señor Americano; every soul of these people is mine.’ ‘So,’ I answered, as stiff for the boast as he, ‘the Techheimers are great people.’ And I blew a lot about my bosses, how they

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watched their men and took an eye for an eye, every time. Finally, we turned back toward the town and came through a patch of cactus to the river, which was brawling along over big stones. There was a narrow foot-bridge across. 'After you,' says the Don. I looked him in the eye, and thought I saw the twinkle of mischief.

"I never wanted to do murder before or since. But there in the dusk, beside that dirty river of mud and stones from the mountains, where he meant to drown me, I came near wringing his neck. I guess my nerves had got tired of expecting things to happen. I walked up to him, and I must have looked fierce, for he whistled, and one or two men who were skulking about joined us. I was so mad that a moment more and I should have had my hands about his windpipe, no matter whether they cut me into mince-meat the next minute. Do you know what it is to feel like doing murder? It's the drunkest kind of feeling

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you can have—you don't know yourself at all—”

“I should like to try that!” sighed Mrs. Bellflower.

At this point there seemed to come somewhere from the rooms above a frightened cry.

“Mercy!” exclaimed the young woman, “what's that?”

Mrs. Simmons sprang up, and stood listening. Then they could all hear distinctly in a woman's voice:

“Oh, oh! He has killed me! Oh, oh!” Then silence.

Before the last groans reached their ears Mrs. Simmons had darted into the dark drawing-room, calling as she sped, “Oscar! my little Oscar!”

On the terrace they could hear again more faintly the “Oh, oh, oh!” from above.

“And what *did* happen to your old Don?” Mrs. Bellflower asked with a show of unconcern.

“Why, nothing much. I—”

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“Oh, Olaf! Come, Olaf!”

It was Mrs. Simmons's voice this time. Simmons bounded from the terrace, calling:

“Yes, Evelyn! Coming, Evelyn!”

The others jumped from their chairs.

“Come, Dr. Vessinger!” exclaimed the Magnificent Wreck. “I think it is time you and I and Miss Flower were gone. Where are the horses?”

“Do you think we should leave quite yet?” the doctor asked, somewhat cynically. “It seems to me the story has just begun.”

“Well, you may stay for the end. But I am going!”



II

SIMMONS stumbled across the hall and up the dark staircase. The coming storm had suddenly blackened all the house. The open doors of the bedrooms sucked out the swaying air that came in puffs from the windows. In the eastern room, above the terrace where they had been sitting, Simmons found his wife, clasping their child in a hysterical embrace.

“What have you done? My darling — my one — my Oscar!” A dry sob ended the broken exclamations.

They were huddled in a heap upon the floor beside the window. The child’s face had a look of intense wonder, of concentrated thought upon some difficult idea which eluded his baby mind.

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Across the iron cot at one side of the room was stretched the inert form of the nurse.

“Look at her, Olaf,” said Mrs. Simmons. “He has — cut her — stabbed her with the knife.”

As Simmons approached the bed, he kicked something with his foot. It fell upon the tiled fireplace with the tinkle of steel. The woman on the bed groaned. Simmons turned on the electric light, and hastily examined the nurse.

“She’s not badly hurt, Evelyn. A scratch along the neck. She fainted at the sight of blood, I guess. But what was the knife?”

He picked up the thing from the fireplace and examined it. It was a long, dull, sharp-pointed knife, brought from the kitchen to cut bread with. Along the edge it was faintly daubed with blood. Simmons, still holding it in his hands, stepped to the window. His wife was crouching there, sobbing over the child, whom she held in her arms

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tightly. Little Oscar's eyes were fixed upon the thunder-clouds outside. He neither saw nor heard what was passing in the room. The father leaned over and touched his forehead with his hand. The child shrank away.

"You must take him out of here, Evelyn!" he said. "I will look after her."

"She must have been cutting the bread for his supper, and laid the knife down on the table for a moment. I—I told her never to leave it about. I have been afraid — of something!"

"You have been afraid?" her husband asked quickly. "Why so?"

The boy moved uneasily and turned his head to watch his father.

"What you got my knife for?" he demanded. "Give me my knife!"

"You shall never, never have it again!" his mother moaned, clasping him more tightly.

"Why not?" he asked curiously. "What's the matter with Dora? Why's she lying on my bed? Tell her to get

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up. I am tired. Oscar wants to go to bed."

His eyelids fell and rose, as though the long search for the mysterious thing in his mind had put him into a doze.

"He does not seem to know what he has done. What is it? Olaf, what is the matter with him?"

"Ssh, hush! Don't rouse him. Get him to bed. *Don't* let him know. I'll look after Dora — she's coming around now — and then I'll call Vessinger, if it is necessary.

"No! no! not him," she protested vehemently. "I don't want him to see, to know anything about it, — no one, but he least of all."

Simmons looked mystified by her vehemence.

"It all seems dark around me!" she moaned.

"There," he said soothingly. "Wrap him in that dressing-gown and take him to your room. I must attend to this woman."

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In spite of his wife's objections, however, he went downstairs to look for the doctor. The room and the terrace were both empty; he could see the party riding, like a group of scuttled birds, at a hard gallop down the lane at the end of the lawn.

"They might have waited to find out!" he muttered. Great drops of rain splashed on the bricks about him. They had fled from his house even in the teeth of the storm. He returned hastily to the nurse, bathed the wound in the neck, and gave her some liquor from his flask. When she had gone to her room, he went downstairs once more, without crossing the hall to his wife's room. That took a kind of courage which he did not have. Servants had lit the lamps in the long room and pulled the shades. Outside the rain swept across the terrace and beat upon the French windows. He waited, listening, irresolute, unwilling to take the future in his hands.

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Finally he detected a dragging step on the stairs. His wife came slowly toward him, her erect young woman's head crushed under a weight of fear.

"They have gone," she sighed with relief.

"Yes, they cleared out in the face of the storm!"

"I am so glad!"

"Sit down, dear," he urged, taking her cold hands.

She disengaged herself from him before he could kiss her, and sat down beside the long table in a straight stiff chair. She clasped her hands tightly and looked at her husband with a face of misery and horror.

"What is it, Olaf? Tell me what it is. Tell me!"

"Why, what do you mean by *it?*" he stammered.

"You know!" she exclaimed passionately. "Don't let us hide it any longer. What is the matter with little Oscar, with *our* child?"

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“What do you mean?” He was still looking for subterfuges.

“It wasn’t Dora. I knew he would do it some day, and I have tried to keep things that he could do harm with from him. I dreaded this. Something seized him, — something inside him, — and he snatched the knife out of her hand. When I got there, he was looking at the knife. It was — all bloody. Oh, Olaf! He was talking to himself. Then he dropped the knife, and he didn’t seem to remember. He is sleeping now, just as if it had never happened.”

“It’s just his fearful temper, Evelyn,” the man answered with an effort. “Dora irritates him, and the thundery air and all. You must pack up and get to the seashore or mountains, where it’s more bracing. He’s just nervous like you and me, only more so, because he’s smaller.”

She shook her head wearily. What was the use of self-deception? Hadn’t she watched this habit of rage for

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months? The child was a part of her; and more than she knew her hand or her foot she knew him. Doctors talked of nerves and diet. But she had seen the storms gather in the child and watched them burst.

“No! That is no use, Olaf. I can’t tell myself those things any more and be contented. It is worse!”

Simmons was walking up and down the room, hands thrust in his pockets, his face knit over the problem.

“All the world like old Oscar,” he muttered, talking to himself.

His wife caught up the words greedily.

“Old Oscar Svenson, your stepfather, the one who brought you up and gave you your education? The one we named him after?”

The man nodded half guiltily.

“Yes, old Oscar, — the man who gave me everything, — the chance to live, to win you — all.”

He resumed his tramp to and fro across the rug, scrupulously refraining

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from stepping beyond the border. His wife still kept her eyes fixed on him, as though resolved to win from him the secret of the matter. Suddenly she rose and went to him, putting her arms about his neck.

“Let me look at you! You have always been a good man, I know. You need not tell me so. This cannot be some terrible revenge for your weakness or wickedness. Have I not held you in my arms? I should have known, if it had been you, for whom our boy suffers.”

He kissed her tenderly and led her to a couch; then knelt down beside her.

“No, Evelyn — not that. But you must be calm or you will lose your head. You take it too seriously. Oscar is a baby five years old. A five-year-old baby!”

“And some day he will commit murder. My God, will you tell me to be quiet and not think of that!”

A maid entered the room to announce dinner.



III

MRS. SIMMONS sat through the meal, white faced and silent. Her eyes followed her husband's nervous movements, but she did not seem to be listening to his incessant talk. He was trying to talk away the disagreeable thing between them, and apparently she had not the strength to join him in the effort. She saw him across the table, strangely apart from her, — not the lover and husband who had been woven into her life. He was a large, tall man, with clear black eyes, a resounding laugh, and vehement, expressive movements. Compared with Dr. Vessinger he had almost a foreign intensity and emotionality about him,

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which it occurred to her suddenly had become more prominent during the years of their marriage, just as his chest had broadened, his arms and hands had become thicker, his whole person had grown mature.

She recalled him as he was when she had first seen him, in Colorado Springs, eight years before, tall, large-boned, awkward. He had gained from civilization. The power that she had felt then in the rough, she had tested in the common manner of marriage and had never found it wanting — until now!

Now, from this fear which beset her, this trouble growing from them both in the person and soul of the child, she could feel no help in him. He was turning away his gaze and chattering, believing only in gross physical ills, such as sickness and sudden death, loss of money and accident, — calamities which one might name to one's neighbors, discuss with one's doctor, and bemoan quite aloud. But for this which

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was unnamable, the fear of destiny, he had no courage: he refused to see! She must grope her way to the understanding of the riddle; she must begin, alone, the struggle with the future. . . .

The maid poured Simmons a second glass of whiskey and water, and handed him a box of cigars. He leaned back in his chair, stretching forward his feet in physical comfort, emphasized by the roar of the summer tempest, which had finally broken in full fury outside. Forked streaks of light illumined the pallid curtains; furious bursts of rain hit sharply the casement windows, as with the thongs of whips. Lull and sullen quiet; then the fury of the tempest — thus it repeated itself.

Mrs. Simmons left the room, noiselessly crossing the hall and mounting the stairs. By the time her husband finished his cigar she had returned, with the same stealthy, restless step, the same questioning eyes.

“He is lying so quietly, Olaf,” she

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said. "His arm is doubled under his head, and his little fingers are open. His lips tremble with his breath. He is my angel again! I cannot believe anything else. Why should *my* child be that demon?"

Her husband put his arm about her affectionately and led her into the drawing-room.

"There! You are coming to look at it sensibly, Evelyn," he said encouragingly.

She drew away from his caress.

"No, no! I know what is there. I had rather see him dead in his bed there to-night than to see that fire in his eyes grow and burn and kill him!"

Suddenly she burst into tears.

"To fear it always. To think of it day and night. To know that it will come back and seize him some hour when I am not there to help him! O God, why did it come to me? What have I done?"

She wept miserably, but when he tried

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to comfort her she held herself aloof. In their misery they were apart, God dealing with each one in his sorrow separately.

“Come, Evelyn!” the husband broke out. “Enough of this! To-morrow we’ll have in a doctor, the best you can find in the city. Maybe he’ll just give him a dose of something and jog his liver.”

But his wife, who had been standing beside the window, her forehead pressed against the cold pane, whirled about and faced him.

“Did you — ever think — that — you were old Oscar’s son?”

“What put that into your head? I told you all I knew — the story old Oscar told me. The whole camp had it the same way.”

“That he found you in the frozen cabin of those Vermonters up among the Rockies? Your father and mother had died from cold and hunger, and he found you just in time?”

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“Yes, that was it.”

He hesitated a moment ; and then he added honestly :

“It must have been so ; but I have never found a man who knew anything about the cabin, or those Vermonters. Well, it made no difference — so long as you took me.”

“No, it made no matter to me. I said so then when you asked me to marry you.” She waited a moment before adding, “And I say so now. *Nothing* can make it any different !”

“Bless you for that !”

But she quickly parted from his kiss.

“Tell me about old Oscar. He was rough and bad at times, wasn't he ?”

“Yes, rough, — not bad — a fierce customer, a regular Berserker, when he was taken that way, — when he was drunk or in a bad humor. But I don't want to think of that — he was so good to me, brought me up, gave me my education, taught me my profession himself, and put me in the way of having

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a happy life. It isn't right to remember his bad side."

"What do you mean? You never told me he was bad. I thought you meant he was rough and uneducated — that he made his way without a cent from the time he landed in New York. What else do you mean? Was he a bad man? Was he wicked?"

The man walked to and fro, disturbed and puzzled. He had stumbled on the worst idea in the world for his wife to feed her imagination upon, and yet he knew that she was aroused — he could not put her off with excuses. He had never told her of his old barbarian benefactor's darker side, partly because he did not like to mention rude vices to her and partly because it seemed disloyal to his kindest friend. And he was not skilful in handling the truth. What he had to say, he was forced to blurt out plainly.

"Why, it wasn't drawing-room life in a Colorado camp in those days, anyway,

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and the older crowd were a pretty rough lot, all of them. Oscar Svenson was better than most, generally. But he would have his times of being drunk and disorderly, and he was such a big fellow and so strong that when he got violent the camp generally knew it. I can remember once when I was a little fellow sitting in the corner of the saloon when he had one of his fits. He was a giant, a head taller than I am, with a great mane of hair all over his head, growing down the nape of his neck in a thick mat under his shirt."

Mrs. Simmons started, and twisted her hands nervously. But she controlled herself.

"Go on!"

"When he was drunk, he didn't shoot — that wasn't his way. He would use his knife, or take up a man in his arms and crush him like a bear with his two hands. That day — but, pshaw! It's all nonsense, my sitting here and telling

THEIR CHILD

you fool stories to make you creepy. The rain has stopped. I'll tell Tom to harness up, and we'll drive over to the Country Club to see if they've got the election returns yet. Come, dear! Try to be strong and patient."

"No! I shall not go out to-night one single step. I can't get that cry out of my head, and I should hear it worse if I were away from the house. Tell me about that terrible old man. Did he kill a man before your eyes?"

"I hate to have you think of him so. He gave me everything, even *you*."

She smiled forlornly.

"He was different in nature from us tame folk in the States. He came from a people that drink deep and have fiery passions, — big-boned, strong-hearted people, as gentle as women and as savage as bulls. I've seen him —"

"What makes you stop so short, when you are just ready to tell something? I want to hear the worst thing you remember."

THEIR CHILD

He stammered and hunted for an excuse.

“Come, come. It’s all rot. They tell stories about men. Such a fellow as old Oscar Svenson you must make allowances for, take the good with the bad. There were plenty of better men ~~than he at his worst, but few as good as he at his best.~~ You can’t line such men up with meeting-house folk. I’ll tell you how he saved the Irish family off Keepsake trail, all alone. But it is stifling here. Come out to the terrace, now the rain has stopped.”

There they sat together on a bench in the corner of the terrace, while he told the story of old Oscar’s magnificent courage and will. The big Norwegian had ploughed his way ten miles up the mountains in a blinding snowstorm to carry food to a woman and some children. The woman’s husband was too cowardly to leave the camp. And when old Oscar had reached the cabin, finding one child

THEIR CHILD

sick, he had gone back to the camp for medicine.

As Simmons told the story, the stars came out in the soft summer heavens; the damp odor of cut grass filled the air. The parched earth, having drunk, breathed forth. But the woman's tense gaze never softened. When he had finished, she said:

"Now you must tell me the worst thing he ever did. I will know it!"

"They say he threw a man over a precipice once, and nearly broke his back. The fellow had been stealing water, when there wasn't enough to go around, and he had had his share. He lied about it, too. Old Oscar just chucked him off the trail like a rat. He would call that justice. I don't know. That was before I knew him."

She shivered, and held her husband's hand more tightly.

"Go on!"

"There were other stories of the

THEIR CHILD

same thing; well, we'd call it murder now, maybe!"

And she forced him to tell much — the dark deeds of this old Berserker in his mad rages, — swift, brutal love, murder — all that the furies of blood drive a man to do. Bit by bit, she had them all, — stories whispered here and there on the slopes of mountains, in far-off mining camps and towns, where the Norseman had spent his life; things remembered out of that rough childhood for which she had pitied her husband, for which she had loved him the more, with a woman's desire to make the bitter sweet. As the soft summer night got on, she heard the story of that killing, the sole one which he had seen with his own eyes. He had locked it tight within his breast all the years since: the quarrel with a friend about some insignificant trifle, the burst of anger, the sudden blow, and then, while the boy tried to part the men, a strange look of wonder on the fierce face from

THEIR CHILD

which the red passion was paling. And the next morning forgetfulness of it all!

“But it troubled him always like a bad dream—he could never remember exactly what he had done. He never thought *I* knew.”

She rose from the bench and walked away from him to the end of the terrace.

“And, my Evelyn,” he pleaded, “you loved me first because *he* had been all I had had. You asked nothing of me—you gave me all your love gladly.”

He had an uneasy feeling that something strange and impalpable was pushing its way between them.

“Yes,” she murmured. “It was—a long time ago.”

“Seven years. Is that a long time?”

“Yes. I was a girl then. It is always a long time to when one was a girl.”

“It doesn’t seem to me a long time!”

“Well, it’s a great while since, since

THEIR CHILD

this came up—like a mountain. The past is on the other side.”

“I don’t know what you mean. No kind of trouble should divide man and wife!”

For a few moments there was silence; then she cried, in the accent of reproach, of accusation:

“Can’t you see? You were *his* child!”

“Old Oscar’s? . . . Sometimes I have thought it might be so. I am dark like him. But we can never know it now.”

“*I* know it! The devil in that bad old man has slept in you and is waking in little Oscar,—my child, *my* child! That is what you have brought me for my love. I took you because I loved you, because I was mad to have you. I wanted you just for myself, just to give me joy. Now! Now! . . . I can sit and watch the child who is me fight with that devil. Oh! there is nothing but pain!”



IV

MOODS of the night pass with their tragic glooms, and the first lines of sorrow fade into dull distaste and distant apprehension. Husband and wife met day by day, and slowly the black cloud between them became imperceptibly mist: the man dared raise his eyes to that pitiable face, and the silent wife began to speak. Doctors had come and applied their poultices against panic,—the vast circle of probabilities, the excellences of regimen.

Then the engineer, in the fulfilment of his business engagements, had gone away for six weeks, which the mother and child had spent at the seacoast for a change of air. Early in September

THEIR CHILD

they were living once more in the pleasant country house outside the great city, and husband and wife were talking almost confidently of what they should do in this matter and that, speaking with more and more certainty as the days slipped past. Something grave in the woman's voice, a touch of doubt in the glance between them—those signs alone remained, and the memory.

Another trip to the mines was to be made; the date of departure Simmons put off, in order that he might take his wife to the large dance at the Bellflowers'. On this day he returned from the city by an early afternoon train. When the coachman drew up before the house, no one could be seen about the place. Simmons called out heartily:

“I say, where are you? Is any one about? Evelyn!”

Windows and doors were open; the summer wind blew through the house. There was a vacancy about it all which impressed the man.

THEIR CHILD

“There was somethin’ or other goin’ on when I hitched up,” the coachman ventured to remark. “There were a lot of hollerin’ and screamin’, sir; somethin’ up with the children.”

He had the air of being able to tell more if necessary. Mr. Simmons jumped to the ground and entered the house. A servant, who finally appeared in answer to his repeated calls, told him that she had seen Mrs. Simmons crossing the meadow below the lawn, in the direction of the little river at the bottom of the grounds. She had little Oscar with her, so said the maid, and she seemed to be hurrying.

He hastened to the little boat-house on the river. Hot summer afternoons it was a common thing for his wife to row upon the river, yet every moment he quickened his steps until he was on the run. From the meadow wall he could see his boat tied to a stake in the stream, riding tranquilly. Evelyn was not on the river. He followed the foot-path,

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hesitatingly, beside the sluggish stream, calling in a voice which he tried to make quite natural :

“Evelyn! Oscar! Evelyn — where are you?”

There was a yard or two of sandy beach beside the boat-house, and there he found them. His wife was kneeling down on the sand, her face to the river, engaged in hurriedly undressing the child. She had him almost stripped of his clothes, and she was talking to him, while he listened with the attention, the thoughtfulness, of a man. Suddenly spying his father, he laughed and broke from his mother's arms.

“There's Dad!” he cried. “Are you going away, too, with mamma and me? She's going to take me far out into the river, away and away, and we are never coming back any more, never going to play any more up there on the lawn!”

His voice rose in the childish treble of wonder, and he added, after a moment :



" HIS WIFE WAS . . . HURRIEDLY UNDRESSING
THE CHILD."

THEIR CHILD

"Now you come, too, Dad."

"Evelyn! What does this mean?"

She had risen hastily when little Oscar called out to his father. Her eyes were red with tears, and her hands shook with nervousness.

"I thought it would be all done, all over, before you came," she murmured. "But he would not come with me unless I took off his clothes. I tried to take him in my arms, but he broke away."

The man shuddered as he gradually comprehended what it meant. Little Oscar ran back to his mother and put his face close to hers.

"Mamma is sick," he said gently. "You must take her home and put her to bed and have Dora sing to her."

His lithe little body danced up and down. The hot wind waved his black curls around his neck. His mother pushed him away.

"Take him," she groaned. "It kills me to look at him."

Simmons gathered up the child's

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clothes and began to put them on the dancing figure.

“What has crazed you?” he demanded roughly of his wife.

“I will tell you — when he is gone,” she answered wearily, leaning her head against the shingled wall of the boat-house.

Little Oscar ran to and fro in his drawers, wet the tips of his feet, and threw sand into the water, while his father was trying to dress him. Finally the mother took the child, put on his shirt, and told him to run home. He dashed into the thicket of alders beside the river with a shout. Soon they heard his voice in the meadow, ringing with the joy of living, the animal utterance of life.

“It was this afternoon,” the mother explained. “The Porters’ children and the Boyces’ boy were playing on the terrace. Dora was away. I was reading in my bedroom — I had told Dora I would look after the children. I must

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have dropped asleep with the heat — perhaps a minute, perhaps longer. Suddenly, I *felt* something fearful. I seemed to hear a choking, a gurgling. When I jumped up, awake, everything was still, quiet, — too quiet, I thought; and I ran to the window over the terrace.”

She covered her face with her hands to shut out the sight of it, and the rest came brokenly through her smothered lips :

“Oscar was there — he and little Ned Boyce. Ned was lying — down on the brick floor — and Oscar had his hands about his throat choking him. I must have screamed. Oscar jumped up, and looked around. He said — he said just like himself, — ‘What is it, mamma?’”

She stopped again and swallowed her tears.

“When I got down there, Ned was white and still. I thought he was dead. It was a long, long time before he got his breath, before he was himself. If, if I hadn’t wakened just then — ”

THEIR CHILD

Above them in the mottled sunshine on the lawn they could see little Oscar running, then stopping and listening, like some sprite escaped from the river alders. The man watched him springing over the turf, his little shirt fluttering in the breeze, and gradually his head sank. Then he straightened himself, and taking his wife's hand led her back along the river path into the meadow.

“Ned Boyce is a bad-tempered little fellow: he irritated and exasperated Oscar until with the heat and all that he clutched him. We must think so at any rate. I'll lick it out of him, if I catch him at it!” He ended with this feeble, masculine threat, this desire to take his exasperation out on somebody else—to be paid for his distress of mind. “But it frightens me to think of your coming here and thinking of doing such a thing!”

He turned his mood of reproach directly to her.

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“If you had seen Ned lying there so white — it was whole minutes before he opened his eyes,” — she protested; and then it seemed to come over her in a wave that in her struggle with this evil she was alone, — her husband did not really understand what it meant. To him it was trouble, like difficulty with servants, — something which his buoyant nature refused to take altogether seriously. For him there was always a way out of a situation: to her there was no avenue out in this situation. She took her hand from his arm and stepped forth steadily by herself.

She had done him wrong! In his slower, less vivid mind, the tragedy was printing itself. He no longer could talk comfort. Something heavy and hard settled down on his spirit: he saw himself and this tender woman caught in a rocky bed of circumstance. In the gloom of his mind he could see no light, and he groaned.

Thus, together they mounted the

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slope of the lawn to the pleasant cottage, side by side and yet withdrawn from one another. As they reached the terrace little Oscar darted out, like a fleet arrow, from the big syringa where he had lain hidden. His voice rippled with joy :

“You’re so slow, you two! Do you see what I got? A piece of Mary’s Sunday cake. And *that’s* what’s left. I’ll give you that, mamma, if you’ll be good.”

“Take him away!” his mother exclaimed fretfully. “I can’t look at him yet. I have had enough for one day.”

She entered the house and locked herself in her room. Later, when her husband knocked, she opened the door; she had been sitting before her dressing-table, looking vacantly into the mirror.

“I don’t suppose you want to go over there to their party?” he ventured timidly. “I’ll send Tom over with a note.”

“Why would I not go? Why should

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I stay at home? Is [this the sort of place a woman would want to stay in all the time, do you think? Heavens! if anything could make me forget for one quarter of an hour *this* idea, — anything, I would go — and sin for it too! Do you understand?”

The man's face winced for the pain she had to bear. Again she burst out, looking into the mirror, her hair fallen about her strong young breast and shoulders:

“You brought this to me, you! Why didn't something tell me of all that was hidden away in you, all that some day would come out from you and be mine? You did not let me know. Now I cannot get away from it! O my God! Why do you make me live? What right have you to make me live and endure?”

He did not resent her bitter reproaches. It was the instinctive recoil of her young body from terrible suffering, the first twitch of the flesh from the

THEIR CHILD

knife. There were no tears left in the eyes now; nothing shone there but passion and resentment.

“Stay at home? It’s the night of all others I’d go somewhere—get something. No! I won’t give in. I’ll get away from it, forget it, and be happy again. I will—see me do it. . . . They dine at half-past eight. Have the carriage at eight. I shall be ready.”


He walked to and fro in the dressing-room, wishing to say something that could soften her mood. At last he put his hand gently on her beautiful bare shoulders and lowered his face to hers.

“We must take this together, love,” he whispered simply.

“Don’t speak of it!” she cried, drawing herself from his touch. “Don’t touch me. I shall go mad, mad! You will have two instead of one, then.”



V

“OUR husband seems to be having a good time,” Dr. Vessinger observed, twirling his champagne glass between his strong bony fingers. “Does he often enjoy — these good spirits — this — enthusiasm?”

Below them in the main portion of the large dining-room of Mrs. Bellflower's house, the guests were supping at small tables. Dr. Vessinger had captured one of the few tables in the breakfast room at one side. Simmons was seated next to Mrs. Bellflower. His good-natured, bearded face was thrown back, and his eyes shone with champagne. His wife looked at him with

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surprise; she had not noticed him before. He was talking a great deal, and repeating what he said to right and left, in a loud voice, with much laughter. She could not hear what he was saying, but she divined that it was silly.

“No! I never saw him so—excited, before,” she answered her companion. “He doesn’t usually drink champagne.”

“He seems to like it rather well,” the doctor replied, watching him drain a fresh glass. “It’s a good thing to have such good spirits, isn’t it?” He turned his eyes to hers, and raised his glass. “To your beautiful self, Evelyn!”

She could feel the warmth of her blood as it rushed over her face and neck, at his deliberate words.

“Why do you call me that?” she asked brusquely.

“You may remember that I called you that once before,” he replied, unperurbed; “and then you had no objection to my familiarity.”

They were both silent, while in their

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minds rose that "once before": the roses blooming in the Sicilian garden, husbanded by bees; the young American doctor sent south to recover from a sickness; the romance of their hearts beating in unison with the romance of the place.

Gradually her eyes fell from the doctor's face. For, later, she had forgotten him, measured him by another and found him less than she desired. She had sent him away, the young American doctor of the Sicilian garden, and had never thought to ask herself before, whether she could regret it. Now she raised her eyes to his face and wondered whether she were regretting it.

He was handsome and mundane. In those eight years he had pushed himself from obscurity to a point of worldly ease. Perhaps she had done that for him by sending him away! To her, now, though married, he was more interesting than ever before. What she had done to him then he had surmounted;

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and now, somehow, it seemed the gods had put the cards into his hands.

Suddenly, while she was wondering, he leaned nearer to her and said:

“You are miserable. I can tell it from the lines in your forehead. And your eyes are hot with fever.”

He spoke impersonally; it was like the soothing hand of the physician to his patient. Simmons was laughing still more hilariously, and his neighbor, the Magnificent Wreck, was laughing with him; those near them were shouting and clapping their hands; they were urging him to do something. To his wife it all seemed silly.

“Does *that* worry you?” continued Vessinger, following her eyes.

She looked at her husband again with a sudden sense of detachment from him. He was foolish, like a child, and she suspected why he was foolish and drank too much: he wished not to think. She despised his male way of trying to escape from himself. His was the man's

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simple, coarse instinct — to drink, to laugh, to forget!

Suddenly he was just a man in black and white, like all the others who had come to her that evening and said words and smiled and danced and gone away. He was just a man, like one-half creation.

“Yes,” she replied steadily to the doctor. “I am miserable. Does it make you happy to know that?”

She did not comprehend what inferences he might draw from the juxtaposition of acts and words.

“In a way, it does,” he answered calmly. “But I shouldn’t let *that* bother you. Our hostess, good woman, loves a laughing guest, and your husband is colossal. The best of men forget themselves, you know, and on the morrow they are ashamed. A good wife forgives — that is her *métier*.”

The racket below increased until every one stopped his eating or his talk to find out what made the disturbance. Simmons was rising somewhat unsteadily

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to his feet. His tie had come undone. His large brown eyes, usually twinkling with gentle kindness, flashed with the passion of the moment.

“Bravo! Simmons! Bravo! A song!” rose from some of the guests. “Sing your old song, Sim!” one called out. The guests jostled into the dining room, deserting the terrace, where they had been supping and flirting. There were some among the men who had been at the School of Mines and knew his college fame.

“So your husband sings?” Dr. Vessinger asked.

“We will hear,” his wife replied tranquilly. “Listen!”

The drinking song, which was not meant for dinner-parties where any proprieties were observed, rolled out, at first uncertainly and then with greater force. At the end of the stanza, young men’s voices from all over the house shouted out the chorus. One or two of the older men shook

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their heads, and while laughing said: "No, no. That's too bad! Some one should stop him."

"It seems to take," Dr. Vessinger murmured to Mrs. Simmons. "He has chosen that moment of inspiration when we are all drunk enough to think it a great song and not too drunk to join the chorus. Bravo! More, more!" he called with those who were applauding.

It was, apparently, a tremendous success. Men were patting Simmons on the back, and a servant was filling his glass with champagne. The calls for another stanza grew more clamorous.

His wife looked at him stonily. She did not make much of his unaccustomed drinking, of the spectacle he was offering of himself to their public. She was wondering at his male mind. How could *he* find it in him — just now with the truth they both knew but two hours cold in his memory — how could he find the heart to drink and sing? She

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had said to him defiantly that she would get joy in spite of all. But was there anything in life which could make her drink and sing and forget? Her heart was shut to pleasure, and she looked at him coldly, as one might look at a bad actor who is much applauded.

He, poor man! had sat down to the feast with the twin devils of despair and remorse by his side. The others around him laughed and were merry. Why should *his* food taste bitter when to them it seemed sweet? Why should his be the wife and his the child? He felt himself to be a common man, and wished to have their taste for the feast, their content with common life. So he began to drink because it was pleasant to drink. The devils faded as the spirit of champagne entered him. At last he was comfortable, and then happy. The woman by his side, the Magnificent Wreck, became beautiful, witty, and

THEIR CHILD

alluring. The woman at his left smiled with a pretty doll's smile, showing her nice teeth, white like porcelain. He was drunk; he knew it, and he was happy!

So he wanted to sing, to make the room ring with his new joy. There seemed to open a concealed door in his mind, and out tramped words and sounds, expressing beautiful, happy feelings; he was singing. . . .

"On the table! On the table!" they shouted to him. "Up, up!"

The older men were trying to calm the racket to a more decorous note. But already they had cleared the dishes and glass from his end of the table, and the Magnificent Wreck, with glistening eyes, was applauding, urging him on. He hopped on his chair, like a boy, as he had done years ago at college dinners. He placed one foot on the table to steady himself, raised the long-stemmed wine-glass above his head, and, less certainly, out rolled the second stanza.

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It was good to be drunk, if this were being drunk! Again, with all the volume of the first time, sprang the notes of the chorus.

Simmons raised his long-stemmed glass and waved it slowly in a circle above his head. They clapped and stamped and sang over again the chorus.

"Why not leave? Why inflict this on yourself?" the doctor asked his companion.

"*That* does not make me miserable," she answered coldly, recognizing how he had mistaken her. "It is foolish, of course, to drink too much. He will be sorry to-morrow."

"What is it then that burns your eyes, and gives you that look of pain?"

"I will *never* tell you!"

"Perhaps I can guess," he answered at random.

Her eyes lost their defiance. Perhaps this subtle doctor, who could read the miseries of life, had seen

THEIR CHILD

and comprehended all, that afternoon when he had come to call. The shame that she vowed to herself he should know last of all, he knew, perchance, *best* of all.

“Don’t reject my sympathy,” he added. “I pity you.”

His voice had softened from the tone of irony. His gentleness broke down her pride. There was something humanly warm and kindly in his sympathy. It seemed to reach farther than her husband’s. A mist gathered in her eyes, and she lowered her head that he might not see the possible tears and the quivering lips. . . .

Would her fate have been thus cruel, if, in the years gone by, in the Sicilian garden, she had preferred this man, — if this man, who loved her, had been bound with her? Would she have known the clutch of terror and felt the wound from the arms of her son? The child who was hers and another’s — might he not have been wholly hers?

THEIR CHILD

She thought bitterly how the male heart had its escape from misery, — such an easy, common one! She wanted *her* escape. She could not drink and shout; she could fly, leave the terror behind her, and seek a new self in a new world.

“To one that loves you as I do, your misery is his misery, and your despair is his.”

She felt that she should resent his words, but her heart welcomed them.

There was a cry in the room below them, then a crash, and the song came to an inglorious end. Simmons had circled the swaying yellow ball of sparkling wine in too ample an arc. The champagne dashed upon the laughing, upturned face of their hostess; the glass shattered on the floor. A kindly hand saved Simmons from falling.

Dr. Vessinger's sharp eyes detected the glance of contempt in the wife's face.

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“I think a breath of night air would suit us both better than this hubbub,” he suggested, opening the casement window behind him. “Will you take my arm, Evelyn?”

She hesitated a moment, a sense of duty to be done detaining her. Then, with another look at her husband, at the noisy room of flushed people, repugnance mounted too high; she placed her hand on the doctor's arm, and stepped down to the terrace beneath the casement. Beyond lay the scented gardens, the breadth of cool heavens, the velvet darkness outside the range of light from the cottage windows, pointed in places by tall poplars.

“Let us get beyond the sound of their noise,” the doctor murmured, drawing her more closely to him. A fresh burst of laughter, doubtless caused by some new antic of her husband, sped her steps away from the band of light about the house. She shivered with distaste of it. Not that! Rather to flee away in the

THEIR CHILD

cool, dark night, away forever from the life which she had known and which was a failure, — to find escape from the threatening horror which was hers and his!

Vessinger drew her wrap more closely about her, with an air of domination, and she followed submissively through the deserted alleys of the dark garden, listening to his tense words, in a lethargy of spirit. . . .

There was an eruption from the brilliant house. Men's voices reached the pair in the garden. The voices protested, coaxed; for a time they faded away to the other side of the house. Then they returned, and the woman in the garden heard her husband speaking thickly and loudly.

“That's all right, boys. But I must find my wife, first. Dixey says he saw her go out here, when I was singing.”

She started involuntarily, but the doctor restrained her.

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“They will take him away,” he whispered, “in a minute.”

Evidently that was what his companions were endeavoring to do, but Simmons with drunken obstinacy persisted in his point.

“Yes,” he said, in his loud, confident voice, “I’ll go with you all right, just as soon as I find my wife. Never left my wife. It wouldn’t be right, you know!”

She slipped her arm from her companion, and walked rapidly toward the terrace, Vessinger following her.

“I am here, Olaf,” she said, going up to the knot of men. “Are you looking for me?”

His companions separated awkwardly, — all but one, who held Simmons’s swaying figure.

“That you, Evelyn? Wanted to tell you that I am going in town with these fellows. Let me get the carriage for you. Don’t mind going home alone, do you, Evelyn?”

THEIR CHILD

"I will take Mrs. Simmons to her carriage," Vessinger offered, stepping forward.

"Excuse me!" Simmons replied, waving him back. "Will you take my arm, Evelyn?"

Together in some fashion, they reached the *porte-cochère*, and there again Vessinger tried to put Mrs. Simmons in the carriage, to whisper a word privately to her.

"Shan't I drive back with Mrs. Simmons?" he asked. Simmons wavered unsteadily, looking at Vessinger all the time. Then he said very distinctly:

"No thank you, Vessinger. We can trust the coachman,—good man, the coachman."

He handed his wife to the carriage.

"Won't you come, Olaf?" she asked. "I think you had better come with me."

Her tone was cold and hard. The man drew himself up quickly.

"Thank you, Evelyn. I had rather not. Good-night."

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He closed the carriage door, and turned to the men, who had been awkwardly watching the performance from a distance.

“Drive on, Tom. Ready now, boys.”



VI

THE morrow was close and sultry. The sun pursued its course through the heavens, round and red like a ball of heated metal. Careful housewives in suburban cottages scrupulously drew in the shutters, pulled the shades, and closed the windows against the fierce heat. Thus they produced the musty coolness of the tomb, in which they existed languidly until late afternoon. Then easterly windows were opened, admitting fresh air.

On the eastern piazza of the Simmons house, as the sun sank, there appeared two people. Mrs. Simmons moved here and there restlessly, her face pale with the heat of the day, dark circles beneath her blue eyes. She looped up the wilted tendrils of the climbing vine, patting the

THEIR CHILD

belated blossoms with her soft, plump hands. Behind her in the shade of the long house Dr. Vessinger lounged on a chair, smoking a cigarette.

“Evelyn!”

The doctor's low voice just reached to her. She started and turned her face to him. He was a slight man, with an active, well-proportioned body. How much he had done for himself since those far-off days when she had first known him! He was *Some One* now; she had a vague movement of pride that she had held his fancy all these years.

“You knew I should be out to-day?” he questioned, following her with his intelligent eyes.

“Yes,” she answered dully. “I suppose I did. It was the proper thing to do,” she added bitterly. “No! I don't mean that! I know you are kind — only I suffer so!”

“Has your husband turned up yet?”

“No, but he telephoned that he should be back for dinner, late, quite late.”

THEIR CHILD

“Oh! Pat Borden took care of him. He was well looked after. You needn't worry.”

“Why should I, about him?” she asked inquiringly, as if she failed to see any significance in what he said. “He telephoned; he is well; he will be here this evening. I do not think about him especially.”

“I hope you have thought about —”

“No, no, please don't say those foolish things. They don't sound well the day after.”

He threw away his cigarette and joined her.

“You men are all alike!” she continued musingly. “You are all at the bottom brutal; you don't care for anything but — what it means to *you*. I wonder if there was ever a man born who could care for a woman more than for himself?”

“If there were, the woman would tire of him in a week.”

“Mamma! You here?”

THEIR CHILD

Oscar came skipping out of the house, making one long leap from the drawing-room window to the railing of the veranda. Then he ran toward his mother, arms stretched out to hug her.

"Nice little fellow," Dr. Vessinger remarked propitiatingly. "Won't you come here, little man?"

"No, no!" the mother objected hastily. "Run away, Oscar. Ask Dora to take you to the Laurels. It will be shady and cool there."

The child looked steadily and curiously at the doctor.

"Who is that gentleman, mamma?" he demanded.

"Ha, ha, well said!" the doctor laughed. "He wants to know who your friends are, madam. He will manage *you* one of these days. Come here, sir!"

Instead of running forward at the doctor's invitation, the child backed steadily into his mother's dress, eyeing the stranger with dislike. Mrs. Simmons glanced up at the doctor, sur-

THEIR CHILD

prised and annoyed at his conduct. Did he not understand? How could he anger the child, perhaps provoke one of his frightful paroxysms? It was disagreeable in him to dwell thus on her misery, to play with the child.

"Go away, Oscar," she said, leading him away from the terrace.

At the same moment Dr. Vessinger walked toward the mother and child. Oscar stood still, his limbs stiffening, his under lip trembling. Tears began to gather in the mother's eyes. She was frightened, and she hated the imperious man.

"Come, dear," she urged. "Come with mamma. Be good and do as I want you to."

She had leaned down to him, and he threw one arm about her neck and drew her close to him, looking defiantly at the doctor.

"Is he the man who makes you cry, mamma?" he asked. "Send him away. I will drive him away!"

THEIR CHILD

As the mother watched him, standing there with his head thrown back, the black curls falling on his brown neck, he recalled to her vividly his father. She had seen the man in something like the attitude of the child. Commanding, erect, noble, defiant, — so she had seen him and worshipped him during the months of their ardent first love. The little mite was like her lover born again.

“Fiery little devil, isn’t he?” the doctor remarked, hesitating and disconcerted. “Looks as if he would like to smash me, stick a knife into me, or something. Handsome, though!”

“I think you had better sit down,” Mrs. Simmons answered coldly. As the man stood irresolute, she added vehemently :

“Why do you tease the child? Go back!”

The doctor turned back to his chair sulkily. The mother kissed the boy’s face, gently loosening the grasp of the

THEIR CHILD

strong little arm about her neck. "Come, Oscar," she whispered. "We will go together!"

She led him from the terrace, he looking backward constantly and scowling at the unacceptable guest.

"Send him away, mamma," he said. "I don't like him."

"Ssh, ssh," his mother murmured reprovingly, seeking to soften his barbarian instincts.

She was gone for what seemed to the doctor an interminable time, and when she returned there was something cold and severe in her pale face. Before she seated herself, she began to say what she had in mind:

"Dr. Vessinger, there is something I must say to you, all at once, now, and then you must go. You have made love to me, — yesterday evening, — and I listened. I was in great agony of mind, and so foolishly absorbed in my pain that I thought you — you understood what my trouble was. I wanted to escape from

THEIR CHILD

it — at any price. I was wild and bad. Now, well, you don't understand ; and I know, myself, I could not get any joy or give any, without him, little Oscar."

"I don't understand," Dr. Vessinger exclaimed, thoroughly mystified.

"No, you don't understand," she admitted with cool irony. "Perhaps it is not necessary that you should. You doubtless see that I could not give you the pleasure you look for."

"I do not admit that for one moment," he protested, rising.

She held out her hand.

"I was right — eight years ago ; that is all, my friend."

He took her hand and held it, trying to come nearer, to melt the icy mood of the woman. She smiled pleasantly at him, unmoved, confident, and in another world of feeling than his.

"You are not well," he stammered, "not yourself !"

"Who can tell what *is* yourself ? Last night I wanted the freedom of my youth.

THEIR CHILD

Now I am ready to take the other thing, which makes us old, — pain. Good-by.”

He still held her hand, and she smiled at him, aloof. Just then a man’s voice sounded from inside the house, and Simmons poked his head out of the drawing-room window.

“Oh! You here, Evelyn?”

Perceiving Vessinger, he added gruffly :

“Where is Jane or some one? I must be off to-night, and I want them to pack my bag and give me some dinner!”

“How are you, Simmons?” the doctor called out in his cool manner. “Come out here and let’s have a look at you!”

“I’m all right, Vessinger,” Simmons answered sulkily, stepping through the window.

“That was a great performance you gave us last night, Simmons, a triumph! I never heard anything better. Your waving that glass over the Bellflower’s crown of false hair was magnificent!”

Simmons glowered at the man and

looked furtively at his wife. She seemed to be gazing at something at the other end of the lawn.

“Oh!” Simmons muttered. “Damn nonsense!”

His handsome face looked thin and pale, as if he had been paying well for his moments of forgetfulness.

“Yes,” continued the doctor, with an insistence which seemed to Mrs. Simmons to be petty malice. “You were the success of the evening. Mrs. Bellflower ought to thank you for your parlor tricks.”

“Oh! damn,” commented the harassed man, looking miserably toward his wife.

She turned suddenly to the two men.

“We have had enough of last night, haven’t we?”

“So you’re off again?” the doctor persisted, seeking a new topic.

“Yes, yes, long trip. God knows when I shall get back.” This last he muttered to himself. Vessinger did not

THEIR CHILD

hear it, but Mrs. Simmons looked quickly at her husband. He hung his head.

“You — you are going away?” she asked in a low voice, forgetting the other man’s presence. “To leave me? Going to-night?”

“Why, those Jews telegraphed me — last night — got it this morning — must be in Chicago to meet them.”

He turned to enter the house. Mrs. Simmons followed him without regarding Vessinger.

“I am off,” the doctor said to her. “Good-by.”

But no one heeded him.



VII

“**Q**LAF!”

There was a note of dread in her voice, which arrested the man's footsteps.

“What?” he asked curtly.

“You will not leave me, *now!* You are not going away?”

“You can't want me around much, after last night,” he answered hesitatingly.

“What do you mean?” she asked quickly, a flush coming to her face.

“There's no use of going over it, is there? I began to drink, of course, because I was so damned blue about the boy and you. It seemed as if everything was helplessly mixed up, and there was no way of straightening it out. After

THEIR CHILD

all the fight I made to be something, and to win you, and to give you a good place in the world, — all that was suddenly smashed. I couldn't stand sitting there and thinking of nothing but that. And when I looked about at those folks, and saw how gay and lively and light-hearted they were, I said to myself: 'Why haven't I a right to a good time, too? What's the use of mulling over this black stuff in my mind?' But I couldn't make a big enough effort to keep away from it! I kept on thinking of you and little Oscar, with all those gay people talking and laughing and handsome women. 'My God,' I said to myself, 'if I can't stop thinking of this, I shall have to get up and go outside.' So I took up my glass of champagne, which I hadn't touched, — never drink it, as you remember; it was the stuff old Oscar used to start in with when he was on a blow-out — that is why I never could bear it.

“That first glass made everything

THEIR CHILD

easier and more natural. It untied the knots in my face. And another made things pleasant; well, there's no use in going on! I made a beastly fool of myself, sang that fool song, disgraced you before all your friends. Showed them how you had married just a hand out of the mines! My God, I should think you'd *want* me to go away and never come back!"

He had dropped into a chair, and lay there limp, his head fallen forward upon his hands. She listened to him with increasing wonder, trying to comprehend the significance of his abasement. What was it which he made so much of? Singing a silly song, drinking too much wine. That was his man's way of escape from the pain of living, which had fastened upon them both. Thus he had tried to live for himself and defy God to make him wretched!

And her way? She reddened with the shame of it, and was silent. Both of them, so she saw, had been trying to flee

THEIR CHILD

from the grief that had overtaken them ; to take their lives out of the place of despair, away to some new peace and joy. She saw it now very clearly, and she knew suddenly that through that gate there was no escape for either of them. The trap that had caught them was set in the obscure past and was made secure.

“But you would not really leave me, Olaf? You could not. You could not! I and our child would follow you in your thoughts everywhere.”

She knelt beside him and took his head in her hands.

“I tried to run away, too. And I could not. Nor could you. Mine was so much worse than yours! I will tell you some day. Yours was nothing to me, nothing. Believe me. I think nothing of it, nothing more than if you spilled a glass of wine on my dress, or went out in the rain without your coat, or did something else foolish. Don't think of that, Olaf! We have so much else to feel, you and I.”



“SHE KNELT BESIDE HIM AND TOOK HIS HEAD
IN HER HANDS.”

THEIR CHILD

She drew his head to her. She was his mother and yearned, and yet was afraid, also. The man's tired eyes looked into her eyes. He, too, had suffered in his male way as she had suffered. About his face there was a look, wistful and young and tender, such as it had been in the past when she had loved him passionately. She kissed his lips, thus wiping away his self-contempt.

“Do you remember, Olaf?” she whispered. “Do you remember the night you carried me down the mountain, when the horse stumbled on the trail and you were afraid to trust him again? Your arms were a shield about my body. I want them now, my husband!”

He saw that black night, the slipping sand and rocks beneath his feet, the precious body in his arms, the white face upturned to his. When he could go no farther safely, they had camped among the rocks under a scrawny fir. He had

THEIR CHILD

built a wind screen of brush against a boulder, and they had crawled within. There he had held her locked in his arms the whole night that she might rest while he watched and loved. . . .

Other memories of their ardent years crowded this one. First she had taken the journeys with him, going to the mines, living in the camps. Then she had waited for him here at home, where he had placed her among her old friends, in this pleasant country house. He was often away, but he worked the more fiercely to get back to her. Once he had come wilfully, without warning, from British Columbia, three thousand six hundred miles, without a pause, hurled on his course by an irresistible desire to know that his joy was real, to see that she lived on the earth still and was his. He had arrived after dinner, and found her dressed to go out, — tall, white, beautiful, — more wonderful than in the camp he had dreamed she was. When she looked up and saw him, —

THEIR CHILD

the unexpected, welcome one, — she had given a glad cry, and lifted her arms and face to his, careless of the maid, her gown, his travel-stained self. . . .

“I had two or three days, and I thought I would come on,” he had said, repaid already in good fact. . . .

She had her memories, too. Her woman's life was woven with the little intimacies of the seven married years. Their life together, their passion and joy, — it blazed before her in the stillness. She had thought it was to go on like that always, for many years, fading perchance when they were old into something gentler, less abundant. Now, suddenly, in the space of a few days, she was brought to see that such joy had a term set within her own experience. It was past!

“We have loved so much,” she murmured. “We have been so happy. That is over now.”

He nodded, bringing her hands to his lips. He knew what she meant. The old

THEIR CHILD

joy, the careless pleasure of their early selves, had gone under the shadow. Something out of them had been created in those hours of freedom, which was now asserting its control over them, — something from the past, unknown to them, gathered up and expressed through them. *They* were now to be less, and this which had come out of them was to be more. Sorrow or satisfaction, it was all one, — it was to be met and borne with. Youth had passed; selfish joy had been blown away — there remained their child.

“Little Oscar,” the mother murmured. “We must do what we can for him, mustn’t we?”

“All that can be done!” he exclaimed.

“Live with him, take him away from here, fight for him,” she whispered. “As long as he lives. As long as we live!” Her tears fell upon his hands.

“Yes! that is it. We must fight together for the child as long as we live!”

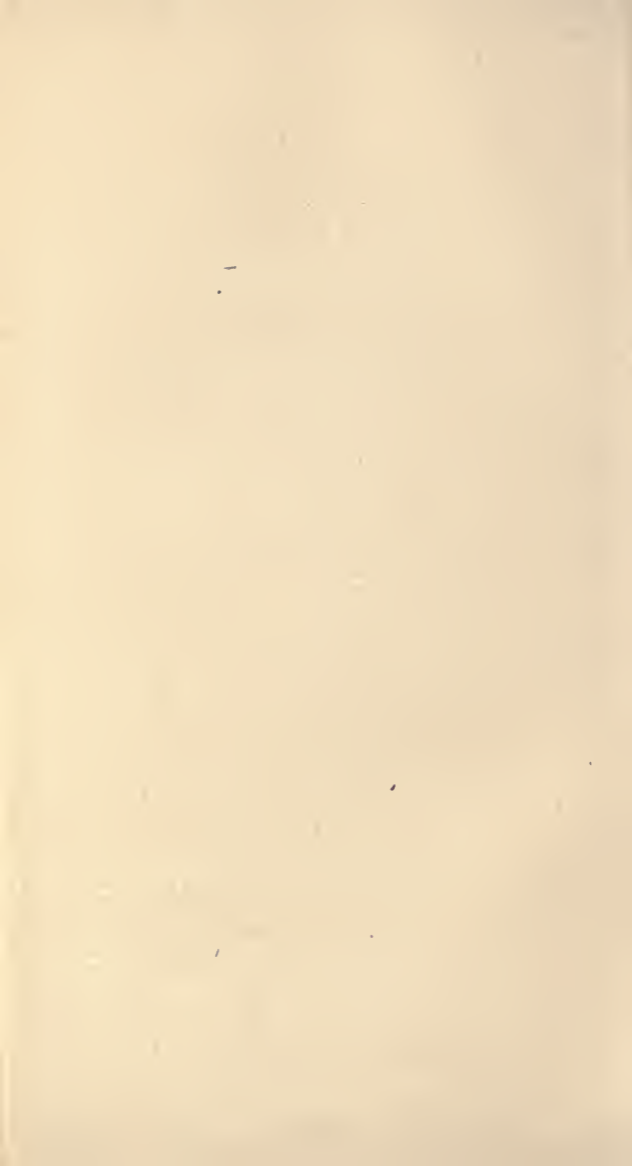
And they both divined something of

THEIR CHILD

how the years must be, living not for themselves but largely for their child, changing their life as his needs changed, preparing to struggle with him against the odds of his fate.

“Where is he?” he asked.

They found him playing by himself under a great tree. When he saw them coming across the lawn, he stood very still and watched their faces, looking at them keenly. His mother took his hand and leaned over to kiss him. He put his other hand up to his father. Thus they walked slowly back toward the house, the child gravely marching between his parents, holding them to him, one on either hand.



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